



Contributed / Zackaria Palmer

The 1,800-acre solar project will be located in Summit Lake Township, northwest of Reading.

Nobles County hears proposal for solar farm near Reading

The project would be situated on 1,800 acres of land

WORTHINGTON — National Grid Renewables Senior Project Developer Tom Karas appeared before the Nobles County Board of Commissioners on Tuesday to present plans for developing a solar farm on 1,800 acres near the Nobles Substation northwest of Reading, in Summit Lake Township.

Referred to as Summit Lake Solar, Karas wanted to introduce the project to the board before the company submits its permit application. If everything falls into place, that could happen by the end of this year.

If all necessary permits are obtained, Karas said plans would be to complete construction of the 200-megawatt solar farm in 2027. Energy produced by the solar panels would connect with the 345KV Nobles Substation and be added to the electrical grid.

He added the project would result in a decrease of 297,900 metric tons in carbon dioxide emissions and would bring revenue, taxes and 254 jobs to the region. The project is estimated to cost \$27 million, which will be paid off over the course of 20 years. National Grid Renewables also has projects planned in Pipestone, near Charlotte Lake in Martin County and is considering a project in Rock County's Elk Creek.

Commissioner Bob Demuth Jr. expressed concern about the project being done at the expense of production agriculture.

"We have taken the stance that we're an ag preservation county," Demuth Jr. said. "We've denied spot zoning because they would take ag (land) out of production. If somebody wanted to build a house in the middle of an 80-acre parcel and take all 80 acres out of production, we've kind of taken that stand that we live on ag here, whether it's taxes, corn or soybeans or whatever.

"This is going to take 1,800 acres out of production," he added. "I want to go on record as saying I'm not against the project. I just need to make an informed decision at some point and I need to weigh the pluses and the minuses. I don't know how to talk to my constituents about this and say, 'I supported this project because it's renewable energy and it would charge 600 houses.'"

Commissioner Gene Metz said the project is a good return to the landowner, but he also said he was torn on the idea.

"It's a very good return to the land owner but for every acre of production agriculture you take out of production, that's about \$400 to \$500 of input dollars," Metz said. "Now they're not being spent on Main Street or seed, chemicals, repairs or equipment and there's a multiplier effect to that. It's a good return to the county on the production tax, but the businesses now are not selling those commodities and putting that money back into the economy either.

"I'm a big proponent of renewable energy so I'm kind of torn between how much do you take out and what the true benefit is, not just for the county but the whole community," he added.

Nobles County Drainage Systems Coordinator Loretta Halbur expressed concerns about the project's logistics.

"After reviewing everything, your project is going to be overlapping with three of our drainage systems; County Ditch 11, Judicial Ditch 11B, and Judicial Ditch 8," Halbur said. "There are concerns about construction, there would be concerns about maintenance and repairs as well after the project is constructed. We have a statutory obligation to maintain and repair these systems.

"My two biggest concerns right now are how are we going to take care of that tile during construction and then how are we going to be able to maintain and repair those systems after things are constructed, like getting access?" she asked.

Halbur suggested National Grid Resources consider a 200-foot buffer corridor over the tile. The other option would be to petition to remove part of the tile in the ditches and then partially abandon it, leaving it in National Grid Renewables' responsibility.

Karas said the proposed location could be problematic for directing power, but that would be relatively easy to address.

"I'd like you to make note of the Nobles Substation because there are some curtailment issues," he said. "It's been under investigation for a couple years now, but curtailment is when energy flow is stopped due to congestion on the grid. When energy flow is stopped, your revenue stops too. We are in partnership here to be able to find a solution and make sure that that substation, by the time this goes live in late 2027, any issues with curtailment with the Nobles Substation will be taken care of."

Karas said the project will be largely beneficial to involved landowners.

"It's a very good investment for you folks and our landowners," he said. "I believe we're at \$1,000 an acre on a 20-year contract. If you can get 200 to 300 acres when you rent your land, we're putting more dollars into that landowner's pocket. If part of the economic impact here is to be able to help the farm economy, we're providing a very generous revenue source to our land owners."

"We want to put out clean kilowatt hours onto the grid and we're extremely proud of the fact that we probably represent the second lowest cost energy going onto the grid right now," he added. "The economic impact of these projects is pretty astounding. There'll be \$20 million that will flow into the county either through tax revenues, payments to landowners, the whole construction aspect. We do a very good job of recruiting and using local labor for our projects. One of the reasons we're out here early is we're still fine-tuning the project."